Enemies of Intelligence: Knowledge and Power in American National Security
Richard K. Betts
New York: Columbia University Press, 2007, 264 pp.

After the shocking intelligence failure of September 11 and the faulty estimate of Iraq's weapons of mass destruction, many observers are asking why such egregious mistakes happened, and what can be done to prevent repeat performances. Washington has never been short on proposed intelligence reforms. Daniel Patrick Moynihan proposed shuttering the CIA altogether while Gary Schmitt advocated giving Congress more raw intelligence. These and other proposals have varied a great deal in quality and feasibility.

Richard K. Betts, professor at Columbia University and one of the best-informed pathologists of the intelligence process, has offered a book that diagnoses the enemies of intelligence: "outside enemies," or outright adversaries who are attempting to defeat the nation's defenses; "innocent enemies," or feckless or incapable American bureaucrats; and, most frequently overlooked, "inherent enemies," which Betts describes as "an amorphous and impersonal group of dysfunctions" that "grow out of the human condition and the dynamics of the intelligence function itself" (p. 12). Betts is primarily concerned with these inherent enemies.

In Betts's view, our expectations for intelligence should be lower. He believes intelligence analysis is at bottom little more than research—enhanced by secret information, when possible—that can inform national policy. This view stands in stark contrast to both the popular conception of swashbuckling secret agents punching their way out of cocktail parties as well as the more sophisticated view that intelligence should be capable, ultimately, of predicting the future with relatively little error. Indeed, Betts concedes that his is "a tragic view of intelligence failure" (p. 13). The tragedy of his view is rooted largely in the belief that it is inherent enemies that pose the most insidious threat to intelligence.

Inherent enemies often manifest as tensions between competing objectives. One example is the tension between centralization and competitive analysis. As Betts observes, "Centralization improves efficiency by reducing redundancy and waywardness among organizations, but it is just those inefficient qualities that foster diverse views and challenges to any single orthodoxy. Pluralism fosters disorder, but centralization suppresses diversity and innovation" (p. 148).

There is also the tension between nuance and usability—that is, be-

tween including dissents where the information is ambiguous and providing policymakers a product that they find usable, given that policymakers generally prefer not to deal with ambiguity. With decades of experience observing the nexus between intelligence and policy, Betts concludes that "solutions that require principals to invest more attention than they already do are conceptually valid but practically weak." Why? Because policymakers "do not have the time" (p. 46). Those who accept such a view of policymakers responsible for protecting their security could be forgiven for developing a cynical view of government.

As Betts's tragic view of intelligence implies, the problems posed by inherent enemies present no easy solutions. In addition, different factions of the intelligence bureaucracy fight pitched battles over estimates, and there have been repeated attempts by policy analysts to influence the intelligence process on the grounds that they possess important critiques of intelligence estimates. The best known of these instances was the controversial "Team B" incident that took place in 1976, when a group of hawkish Soviet analysts led by historian Richard Pipes were allowed to enter the debate over estimates of Soviet military capabilities and offer an analysis to compete with the existing national intelligence estimate. As Pipes recalled, the team's estimate was rooted in members' "deep knowledge of the Russian soul."[4]

In Betts's brief treatment of the incident, he points out that Team B's criticism "focused primarily on the criticism of 'mirror imaging'" and that it "compared apples and oranges—American political intent with Soviet strategic intent, and American public rhetoric (emphasizing mutual assured destruction) with Soviet operational doctrine" (p. 87). "Mirror imaging," a battle cry for many critics of intelligence, refers to an analyst's tendency to project his own method of thinking onto a potential adversary, who may think differently. The result can be an intelligence failure.

Betts glosses over the recurring and pernicious role that criticism of mirror imaging has played in evaluations of the intelligence community. The indictment of mirror imaging has never been leveled at intelligence analysts for possessing a view of an adversary as too irrational or too malevolent. Rather, the treatment of mirror imaging as a recurring type of cognitive bias seeks to institutionalize a critique of intelligence analysis that would lead to a reflexively more pessimistic view of the nation's adversaries. As Betts observes of Team B, a true exercise in competitive analysis would have required a "Team C" that leveled criticism of the intelligence estimates from a dovish side. In reality, the effect of the enterprise was to grant credence to a more pessimistic view of Soviet strategy—an outcome that would have been obvious to any critical observer before the exercise took place.

Ultimately, evaluating Betts's diagnosis of the intelligence process leads one to accept the view that the expectations for the intelligence

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[4] Gregg Herken, *Counsels of War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985), p. 287.

community have been raised too high, and that national security strategies that rely heavily on near-perfect intelligence—strategies that feature counterproliferation policies enacted via preventive war, say—are doomed to failure. As Betts points out in the book's penultimate paragraph, "having a modest view of how well the intelligence system will ever work is only one reason to favor military policies more restrained than those the United States pursued after the Cold War" (p. 193).

The question becomes whether the public will blame policymakers for their mishandling of the national security portfolio rather than blaming the intelligence community for their inability to effectively support the policy. Given that the policy community has demonstrated its willingness to shift blame for policy failures onto the intelligence community, and given that the intelligence community has no political voice to rebut these accusations, it is easy to believe that a disproportionate share of the blame will continue to fall at the feet of the intelligence community. With such a political backdrop, and with the community struggling to adapt to recent reforms and simultaneously fighting enemies outside, innocent, and inherent, it should not be surprising if the intelligence process continues to produce results that fall well short of expectations.

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